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# THE EDUCATION OF MILL CHILDREN IN THE SOUTH

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Recent investigations into the conditions of child labor in the cotton mills of Mississippi and South Carolina have demonstrated the supreme importance of the education of the children employed in the cotton mills of the South.

In dealing with this subject it is necessary to point out the defects in a system which has many admirable traits, and to call attention to some abuses that have crept into an industry that is the pride of our Southern States. No one who has watched the growth of the South since the war, can have failed to note the great factories that have risen in the midst of our cotton fields, adding to the wealth and dignity of this entire section of the country. In the development of the cotton-milling industry there is something more than commercial growth that challenges admiration. Many engaged in these enterprises are men of magnanimity of spirit as well as of business ability. While making wealth for themselves and their country, they have betrayed a noble regard for the welfare of their employees. The welfare work being done at the Monaghan Mills, at Pelzer, at the Victor Mills, at the Olympia and Granby Mills, and possibly at others in South Carolina; the efforts for social betterment evident at Stonewall, Wesson and Laurel, in Mississippi, are instances of that philanthropic purpose so conspicuous in some of the great business enterprises of the present day.

While paying the most cordial tribute of praise to every effort made by the mill owners of the South for the betterment of the toilers who create their wealth, some things have to be taken into consideration along with this philanthropy, before we can form a just estimate of the situation as a whole.

Not every mill is administered with business ability mingled with philanthropy. There are many mills where the business idea appears to be the controlling idea; where only such provisions are made for the workpeople as are absolutely essential; where the chapel, or the school house, built by the business corporation, is

an advertisement of a philanthropy that has exhausted itself in the effort to erect the building. There are mill communities where the people are living under sordid and degrading conditions; where the child is allowed to grow up illiterate, to become a burden and a menace to the succeeding generation.

This fact is very apt to be overlooked. Local and state newspapers, magazine writers and tourist sight-seers write and talk about the welfare work in the Southern cotton mills, until the impression gains ground that welfare work is a general feature among the Southern mills—the rule, not the exception. The contrary is the case. The factory hand often lives under such conditions of illiteracy, of severance from ordinary human interests, of ignorance of the doings of the outside world, of sordid domestic conditions, as to be unfitted for association with his fellow-citizens in other walks of life. He is conscious of this unfitness, and it wounds and degrades him. Even where it is conceded that some mills are not doing as much welfare work as others, it is supposed these will catch the philanthropic spirit, will follow the good example, and the cotton mill at length become the social savior of the South.

While not denying the value of the good example set by the philanthropic mill owners, we should not over-estimate the tendency to follow it. The imitative process is much too slow. At the present rate it will take millenniums to become universal. Meanwhile the degrading process is going steadily on and is working irrevocable havoc among the children. The children must be saved at all hazards. We dare not leave this important work to do itself.

### *Compulsory Education*

Even the best welfare work being done among the workpeople of the cotton mills falls far short of the necessities of the case. In the South we have no compulsory education law. This leaves the matter of the child's education optional with the parent or the child. A large proportion of the people working in the cotton mills is recruited from among the thriftless, the least prosperous of the agricultural population. The man who, himself, has received no education is not apt to have any just estimate of the value of an education for his children. Not being compelled to send his child to school, he finds it easy to escape the obligation. The factory door extends

an open welcome to the child. The question of age hardly counts. If the child is under twelve, it is an easy matter to furnish a certificate of orphanage, of sickness or poverty of parent or, as is too often done, to make a false statement. The child is set to work. He is defrauded of that which is the birthright of every American child—an education. Henceforth he will be handicapped in the race of life. He is doomed to grow up to illiterate manhood. There is abundant evidence of the illiteracy of the older operatives.

We are sometimes blamed for excess of zeal in urging child-labor legislation, and are advised to wait until the good examples set by the mill owners who are doing "welfare work" shall be followed by all the others; but in view of the illiteracy of the older operatives, we cannot but feel that we have delayed too long, and that, had we educated the parents a generation ago, we should not now find so many children growing up in a condition of disgraceful illiteracy. I stood one day last December outside a spinning mill in Mississippi and entered into conversation with half a dozen "doffer boys" ranging in age from eight to sixteen years. Of these six boys only one could read; he was one of the older boys, and he was only "in the Second Reader." Within sight of the spot there was a large industrial and mechanical school, where three hundred negro children were receiving a good common school education with industrial features. The colored children are not allowed to work in the mills, and it is undoubtedly a good thing, both for themselves and their parents, for they are thus left at liberty to acquire an education and to develop physically, out in the open air and the sunshine. These privileges are debarred the poor white child, who has to spend ten weary hours daily in the hot lint-laden atmosphere of the mill, growing up anæmic, deficient in size and weight, illiterate and apt to degenerate morally.

### *Illiteracy*

These are evils that can and do exist in the presence of the most admirable schemes of welfare work. I have had the privilege of examining personally a large number of mill children in South Carolina and Mississippi. The facts concerning some of the mills will show that many hundreds of children are growing up illiterate in the very mills where thousands of dollars are expended yearly in welfare work.

Some of the South Carolina mills were: The Monaghan, where out of 41 children examined 28 were illiterate; the Victor, where out of 8 children examined 5 were illiterate; the Grendel, where out of 13 children examined 7 were illiterate; the Ninety-six, where out of 10 children examined 6 were illiterate; the Lancaster, where out of 45 children examined 34 were illiterate; the Granby, where out of 25 children examined 12 were illiterate.

Some of the Mississippi mills were: The Wesson, where out of 24 children examined 14 were illiterate; the Natchez, where out of 24 children examined 15 were illiterate; the Meridian, where out of 21 children examined 11 were illiterate; the Stonewall, where out of 37 children examined 29 were illiterate; the Laurel, where out of 24 children examined 20 were illiterate.

Those classed as "illiterate" could not read at all or were able to read very little. In estimating the illiterates at fifty per cent. of the children employed, we are a long way within the mark.

These figures enable us to answer the question: Does welfare work in the mill communities serve the purpose of compulsory education? In view of these facts there is but one answer possible—a deliberate and emphatic "No." This answer is made with no desire to minimize or disparage the splendid welfare work being done by the Parkers at the Monaghan, Victor, Olympia and Granby Mills, and by Captain Ellison Smythe at Pelzer, and Belton in South Carolina. Many thousands of dollars are annually expended by these gentlemen, not merely in the erection of buildings, but in the payment of salaries to trained welfare workers who devote their whole time to laboring for the physical, mental, moral and spiritual uplift of the people who work in the mills. The welfare work in the South Carolina mills just named is the finest of its kind I have seen, and deserves the highest commendation. There may possibly be other mills in the South entitled to similar honorable mention. I have not seen all, and therefore cannot speak for all. The mills at Stonewall, Wesson and Laurel, in Mississippi, are also worthy of mention as providing much that is helpful in uplifting the character of the working people and in providing better environment.

But while acknowledging in the frankest and most cordial way the value of this noble work, we cannot acknowledge that it takes the place of compulsory education, or excuses the presence of children in the mill when they ought to be in school. All this

welfare work is advantageous to the child who wants to learn or whose parents desire his education; but the mill is always eager to have the child. Men may waste time, unable to find employment, but to the child, the doors of the mill are always open. The child who does not like school, the child who does not like study—and there are many such—the child who prefers the comparative freedom of the mill, is free to choose, and, in the absence of a compulsory education law, to follow his choice. That child grows up illiterate in spite of the advantages and opportunities which welfare work may bring within his reach.

### *The Call of the Mill*

But even where there is a disposition on the part of the child to learn, the demands of the mill make very serious inroads. School teachers are constantly complaining of the way the children are taken out of school by the mill. The word goes out that the mill wants every child it can get, and straightway the classes are decimated. The fluctuating and intermittent attendance of the children is one of the chief discouragements of the teacher. In nearly every mill school, teachers speak almost despairingly of their work. They declare the impossibility of any satisfactory progress in their pupils so long as they are not permitted to pursue their studies uninterruptedly. The disparity between the school roll and actual attendance reveals the serious character of these inroads.

At Seneca, S. C., out of 110 children on the roll, only thirty-four were present at the time of my visit. The teacher said the others were in the mill.

|                        | <i>School Enrolment.</i> | <i>Av. Attendance.</i> |
|------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| Monaghan, S. C.....    | 160                      | 120                    |
| Victor, S. C. ....     | 210                      | 125                    |
| Belton, S. C. ....     | 201                      | 169                    |
| Pelzer, S. C. ....     | 309                      | 260                    |
| Chiquola, S. C. ....   | 134                      | 60                     |
| Grendel, S. C. ....    | 75                       | 60                     |
| Ninety-Six, S. C. .... | 43                       | 29                     |
| Greenwold, S. C. ....  | 40                       | 28                     |
| Lancaster, S. C. ....  | 190                      | 80                     |

Granby, S. C., attendance was reported by teachers to be 95 to 97 per cent of the roll, but in this school there is a regular half-time system for children that work in the mill. Those who work in the mill in the morning go to school in the afternoon, and *vice versa*.

One noticeable feature about this list is that the average of school attendance is best at those mills where welfare work is done; showing that such work has a tendency to banish indifference to education.

Some have regarded the half-time system as the best solution of the educational problem in mill communities. It is probably better than no system, but it suggests some very serious objections. In the first place it is overtaxing a growing child's strength to require it to work five hours and to study four or five hours each day. Next, it is unjust to the future man to discount by one-half his opportunity for education. To make fitting preparation for the duties of mature life, the child should devote the period from six to sixteen to acquiring an education. It is the testimony of school teachers that the half-timer soon falls behind his more fortunate classmates who are able to devote the whole time to school. The backward half-timer gets disheartened and takes the earliest opportunity to drop out altogether. It is dreary work trying to learn without hope and the inspiration of conscious progress.

### *Results of Ignorance*

Illiteracy is disastrous for both man and woman, but the burden of child labor bears more heavily on the little girl than on the little boy. This is easily accounted for. The little boy generally begins his career in the mill as a "doffer boy." His task is intermittent, allowing him frequent and long intervals for play. At the Monaghan mill, climbing poles and swings have been provided just outside the mill for these boys to use in their intervals of leisure. The consequence is that the visitor often finds a lot of rollicking, laughing boys whose appearance seems to belie much that has been said about the hard lot of the factory child. But with the little girl it is different. She is at once set to work at the spindles; she must be always on the alert. Her toil is incessant and mostly solitary. She is always on her feet, consequently becoming tired and depressed. She loses the expression of childish joy and gladness. She begins to feel and to look prematurely old. Her seniors, unwisely kind, offer her the snuff stick; she welcomes the stimulant, the more readily because it, in a way, compensates for the badly cooked and insufficient food. It is sad to see those little girls, who should be playing with dolls and kittens and learning to read and write, thus early bearing on

their delicate shoulders the burdens of life. But the loss of an education is calamitous, whether to the light-hearted boy or the heavy-hearted girl. The future has to be reckoned with in either case—a manhood or womanhood handicapped, limited, darkened and saddened by illiteracy.

I have sometimes tried in imagination to creep inside an illiterate soul. I have sometimes tried to imagine the sadly narrowed world of a man who cannot read, one to whom the comic supplement of the newspaper is the only intelligible part, to whom a library is an unassailable treasure-house, to whom the discourse of the learned is an unknown tongue; who is doomed to wander outside the glorious paradise where flourish poetry, music, science and the arts; who is humiliated by the consciousness that he is left behind in the race of life, and has a dim consciousness that somehow society has wronged him. Out of that consciousness grows a feeling of resentment, which, in times of popular tumult, is apt to break out into passionate and unreasoning violence. Of such are the hoodlums and the hooligans of our modern civilization.

At Jackson, Mississippi, I made the statement, that manufacturers did not themselves know the conditions within their own mills. My statement was met with smiles of incredulity from some manufacturers present. Yet it must be, if we are to believe what they say. One superintendent assured me that I would not find any children in his department who could not read. He followed as I examined one after another and heard the children confess that they could neither read nor write. I believe that it was with genuine surprise and sorrow that he said, "I did not think it was so bad as that. I see there is something for me and my wife to do among these children." In a South Carolina mill I found a very little girl attending a machine. She was so small that I inquired whether she was on the pay-roll. On being told she was, I asked her age. She replied, "Seven." Others, close by, volunteered the information that she had been steadily working at the mill for eighteen months. She could neither read nor write. She had never been to school. When I reported this case to the office of the factory, the gentleman to whom I spoke, the secretary and treasurer of the company, took down the child's name and promised to inquire into the case.

The question of the age of young children is one about which



I am constantly at variance with the mill managers. Children, to all appearances under twelve, represent themselves and are represented by their parents and employers to be over that age. If indeed they are as old as represented, it is but too obvious that they are engaged in toil that robs them of normal growth and weight; but the irresistible conclusion is that children are taught by their parents to lie about their age and that manufacturers are much too complacent in conniving at the fraud. Everywhere the teachers warmly commend the crusade against child labor. Everywhere they say they could show so much better results for their work if the children were not so often taken from school because they are wanted in the mill. One school teacher, in a factory village where the mill owners claim that they do much in the way of welfare work, spoke of the cotton mills as the "curse of South Carolina."

This denunciation, though strong, will not be unmerited so long as the cheap labor of children takes the place of the higher paid labor of the adult, leaving him to loaf around in idleness while the child, who should be in school, is doing the work of the adult. It is due to the manufacturers to say that many of them are in favor of compulsory education. This measure should be regarded as an essential accompaniment of child labor legislation. The victory is only half won, if, when we compel the young child to come out of the factory, we do not, at the same time, compel him to enter the school.